

The role of belief, dedication and rejoicing at the final stages of a bodhisattva's path

By Gareth Sparham

In the *Heart Sutra* (the “heart” or abridgement of the longer versions of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*) Shariputra asks Avalokiteshvara, “How should any son of the lineage train who wishes to practice the activity of the profound perfection of wisdom?” Avalokiteshvara replies that there are no bodhisattvas, (“no eye, no ear” and so on), there is no bodhisattva path (“no path”), and there is no enlightenment (“there is nothing to reach”). And he says, “because bodhisattvas have nothing to reach they stand in the perfection of wisdom, are free from obscuration, do not fear, and are in nirvana.” Here, the “perfection of wisdom” is both the result, the perfect wisdom of a buddha, and the practice of perfect wisdom by a bodhisattva.

So the question presents itself: If there is no place that bodhisattvas reach, and if there is no path that reaches a bodhisattva's goal, what, exactly, is a bodhisattva's path, what is it that bodhisattvas do? This is the question Ajita (Maitreya) answers in the second chapter of his *Ornament for the Chapters of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra (Abhisamayalamkara)* called “Knowledge of Paths”. (I will explain below why he uses this name for the bodhisattva's path.)

He begins by saying that there are Buddhists with a misplaced pride in being Buddhist. He says that until Buddhists drop Buddhism as a crutch, or as a false support, they cannot overcome false pride in attainments. “The light of the Buddha eclipses them,” he says. Just as light from a gigantic supernova eclipses even the light of the sun and makes bright days look dull, the place where a buddha stands – that is, where there “is no standing place at all” – outshines the places where limited “Buddhists” stand in a self-satisfied, but ultimately flawed belief that they are authentic “Buddhists”.

Ajita is not, of course, suggesting there is some privileged place from where bodhisattvas look at things, themselves included, laid out before their eyes from a God-like perspective. Rather he is using language to convey what an authentic bodhisattva path is, where bodhisattvas find an authentic Buddhist place to stand.

He calls this authentic standing place the “lineage,” where those in line to be buddhas are found. The longer versions of

the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* say this lineage is like the track a bird leaves as it flies through space, no track at all. Birds of every size leave the same track no matter how high they fly and no matter how gigantic their wingspan.

All beings are equally in the buddha line (i.e., they are potential bodhisattvas), because the track of their lives between ordinary birth and death shares with the soaring path to enlightenment the same space-like nature. But even though all beings are in line to be buddhas, still, beings are not in the *actual* line according to convention until they produce bodhichitta, a motivation produced from, and supported by, the seed of great compassion. Until then, all have the potential, “are in the line”, but the potential remains just that. Bodhisattvas nurture the seed by bodhisattva practice, aware that empty space is the same wherever it is encountered.

Any location along the track that ordinary beings trace in their aimless journey through life, or that bodhisattvas trace on their supremely meaningful pilgrimage to full enlightenment inspired by a great compassion for all beings, is equally unmarked, like space. You cannot say of one place or stage that it is different from any other. This is expressed in both negative and positive terms by saying that there is no starting place, no path, and nowhere to reach; and that the starting place, the path, and the goal are the same.

In Sanskrit the word for “track” also means “meaning of a line of words”. So, “no track” can also mean “no meaning of a line of words”. Based on that, Tibetan Buddhist teachers say again and again that bodhisattvas know the emptiness of all dharmas, or in other words, know that all things lack inherent existence. The bodhisattva path, then, is not something that bodhisattvas tread. Rather, it is the line traced out by persons



who understand lineage and are motivated by bodhichitta, the thought to be enlightened for the sake of others.

According to Ajita, bodhisattvas do not tread paths, they model paths. Aware that there is no movement, and that ultimately their nature is in a state of enlightenment, they practice paths as possible models for those who might benefit from them. In this, we might say, they are like a person living in a large city who receives letters from relatives saying they are coming for important interviews at different embassies. The city-dweller wants to be able to take them where they have to go without any hitches, so he or she traces out the routes a day or so before to make sure of knowing the way, how long it will take, and to check for parking spaces and so on. When tracing the routes, the city-dweller is not personally invested and has no purpose beyond learning for the sake of those who will soon be arriving. In that sense, he or she is “modeling” paths. In the language of the Tibetan *lamrim* (“stages on the path”) literature, city-dwellers are treading “shared paths”. The relatives tread “unshared paths” because they do not have familiarity with the city, and travel the paths they are invested in for their own purposes. As the different versions of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* say again and again, bodhisattvas know everything about the paths, but they do not “cross the reality limit” (i.e., they are not invested in them) until they have fully looked after the needs of others.

Some years ago in India I met Gen Nyima. (George Dreyfus, in his book *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping*, gives a nice description of him.) I asked Gen Nyima if a bodhisattva could be a Christian. Gen Nyima, who came from Kham, a region of Tibet bordering on China, recalled that he had seen Christian missionaries when he was young, and took up the position of a debater defending the proposition, inviting me to defeat him. He was much too skilled for me to do so. Similarly, Khunu Lama, in his book on bodhichitta published in English translation as *Vast as the Heavens, Deep as the Sea* says that if Shiva, Vishnu and so on have bodhichitta, so be it. I take the position of both Gen Nyima and Khunu Lama to be that if anyone does indeed have an insight into the space-like nature of reality, and if, motivated by great compassion, they act in accord with it to demonstrate to the faithful what benefits them, and are not limited or defined by nor invested in just that manifestation of kindness, then so be it – there is no greater purpose to which a person can aspire. If, however, they do not have the understanding and

motivation, it is not condescending to wish them well along with every other being.

In his “Knowledge of Paths” chapter, Ajita restricts the number of paths that bodhisattvas work with to three: the paths of followers of the Buddha when the actual Buddha was on the earth, of Buddhists who came soon after the Buddha’s death and of Buddhists who follow the Mahayana.

Bodhisattvas know fully the first path (codified as the four noble truths) but they do not enter into its results as a final destination. They know the path of pratyekabuddhas (also codified as the four truths) as the path of those who practice by themselves, or even “for” themselves. It is a path for persons of a higher status, who do not need to be taught in actual words, and who can teach others by their own special way of avoiding conflict and promoting harmony. Bodhisattvas, who are “following” or “modeling” it, model the moral life either in a community or in retreat. They avoid commotions, understand that objects out there are constructs, but settle down on their knowledge as true.

Ajita calls the bodhisattva’s own unshared path “a path beneficial here and in the hereafter”. It is the unshared vision that bodhisattvas enter into – an insight that sees that even a bodhisattva’s own realization is equally lacking any final truth or reality. I have heard His Holiness the Dalai Lama say, “There is no absolute in Buddhism, but, if there were to be one, it would be altruism.” And Professor Luis Gómez, who recently retired from the University of Michigan, has remarked that Buddhism is unusual among the religions of the world for promulgating a doctrine that denies even to itself an absolute truth.

Ajita says the bodhisattva’s path of meditation functions to turn the place that it is found into a special place. In this he closely follows the longer versions of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* that say the perfection of wisdom makes special the place where it is found, so much so that worship of the perfection of wisdom, even in just book form, produces more merit than infinite beings in infinite world systems who construct stupas made of seven jewels containing Tathagata relics and worship them for an eternity. Indeed, the *Sutra* says worship of the perfection of wisdom produces more merit than even the sum of all merits produced by all spiritual pursuits including the merit made by buddhas who turn the wheel of Dharma in every place and time.

Cultivating such belief, along with the practice of increasing merit through rejoicing, and turning over the

sum of merit for the sake of others, defines the higher reaches of the bodhisattva's path of meditation. That these practices are important is shown by the fact that they are set forth after the explanation of the Mahayana path of seeing – the transcendent vision of the lack of final reality in even a bodhisattva's own realization.

To understand what the practices are, and why they are so important, first consider books and people's attitude to them. Groups often make certain books very special and begin to treat them as something more than what they self-evidently are, namely, the products of human thought and effort. Some religions give special status to a single book that no other book can have. Hinduism and Buddhism differ somewhat in extending a special status to more than one book.

Generally speaking, scholars refer to an open canon, when the corpus of a sacred text or set of texts is still being negotiated; and a closed canon, when the negotiation is closed and sacred authority is no longer extended to other works. The tension between an open and closed canon is evident throughout the history of Buddhism. First, there was conflict over who should be involved in the process of authenticating the words of the Buddha. Then, in the earliest years, there were some who denied canonical authority to the abhidharma, later there were some who denied canonical authority to Mahayana scriptures, and later still those who denied canonical authority to Buddhist tantras. In each case, we may say that some insisted that the canon was closed.

Even in Tibet, where there is an unusual tolerance when it comes to the question of canonical authority, there has been a tension between those who deny the full authority of canonical literature to treasure texts (*terma*) and those who feel supremely comfortable in extending the fullest authority even to texts that others might judge as "just books" written by ordinary persons.

The status of books and attitudes to them is important because the parts of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* that explain the bodhisattva's path of meditation give a special status to the perfection of wisdom, even just the perfection of wisdom in book form.

Now, it is not exactly the case, as Professor Gregory Schopen argues, that the anonymous authors of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* and Ajita say the bodhisattva's meditation at this stage of the path consists in cultivating a belief toward a closed canon similar to the belief encouraged in Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Sikhism towards the Torah, Bible, Koran and Adi Granth. That interpretation does not make much sense within the larger context of the

texts' insistence that even a bodhisattva's realization has no final reality and is an interpretation that unwittingly attributes historically later attitudes to people in earlier times when there is no evidence that those attitudes existed. Still, both the *Sutras* and Ajita say belief in the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*, even in book form, is of the greatest importance in the bodhisattva's path, and they exhort bodhisattvas to cultivate a belief more unshakeable, if you will, than even the belief of Jews, Christians, Muslims and Sikhs in their special books.

The clearest interpretation of the role of a bodhisattva's belief is found in the opening lines of Chandrakirti's explanation of Nagarjuna's *Basic Text on the Middle Way*. There, he expresses his belief in homage to great compassion. He says that the listeners and pratyekabuddhas learn their paths from the teaching of the Buddha, the buddhas become buddhas by following the bodhisattva path, and bodhisattvas become bodhisattvas when they have non-dual knowledge and bodhichitta based on great compassion. That great compassion is like a seed that is the origin of the bodhisattva's path, like water that allows the bodhisattva's wholesome root to grow into enlightenment, and when they reach the goal, explains the outflow of altruistic work that comes spontaneously like crops coming forth in abundance at harvest.

The *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* and Ajita express the same idea that Chandrakirti has formulated so well by calling the perfection of wisdom "mother". They mean that the perfection of wisdom, as the knowledge of emptiness coupled with the bodhichitta motivation, is the origin of all that is good. To worship and believe in the origin of all that is good is to worship and believe in all that results from it.

The earliest known commentary on Ajita's text, by a little-known writer called Arya Vimuktisena, says that with their special belief, bodhisattvas refine merit out of their lives, like getting a lump of gold from ore. With their practice of rejoicing in all good work, from the smallest good deed up to the work done by buddhas, they end feelings of envy, cultivate a joy for the good, and make their work and the work of others the same. With their practice of dedication, or turning over, they make the heap of merit into the cause of perfect enlightenment, like a goldsmith turning a gold nugget into an ornament like an earring. ❁

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